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Salem Witch Trials and Gender; Past and Present

One of the most tragic and traumatic incidents in the psyche of modern America came early in it's history. In the largely Puritan colonies of 16th century New England, a place where new ideas about religion, gender equality, and education were flourishing, an outbreak of paranoia and superstition gripped the colonies in 1692, leading to the imprisonment, execution, and social isolation of many. These trials and events, though spread out over the course of a year in different areas, are known today as the Salem Witch Trials. Many Americans know the story, from reading "The Crucible" by Arthur Miller, or watching some of the many, many documentaries which seek to find the "real" reason behind Salem, as well as to revel in the knowledge that such ignorance and callous cruelty is, of course, behind us.

In this essay, we will explore first the misconceptions about Salem, the actual geographical and historic recounting of the trial, the gendered implications of men's and women's accusations, before we discuss the major role of the slave Tituba, her life, her story, and the implications around each new version's portrayal of her race and the implications thereof. Finally, we shall discuss how the concept of witches has developed in America as a whole, from a symbol of rebellion and destruction of the Godly order, to a symbol of rebellion and destruction of an outdated and oppressive society.

The conventional Salem story goes like this; in the year 1692, in the English colony of Massachusetts, in the town of Salem, a group of young girls, perhaps bewitched by stories of the Reverend Parris's slave, Tituba, started to have fits of scream, convulsing, and self-harm. As the

village doctors became convinced that there must be devilish work a foot, the girls started to allege that the spirits or specters of local women were cursing them, harming them. This. Like a dam breaking, led to women being accused back and forth of witchcraft. The innocent women denied any type of witchcraft or involvement with the Devil, and the courts twisted their words until every woman was absolutely guilty. Those who did not confess were hung, the church teaching their grieving families that their loved one's souls would burn in torment forever.

After reaching a fever pitch, the common story of Salem goes, the witch trials faded out; spectral evidence was banned in courts, the souls of the dead were pardoned, and the accusers shrugged their shoulders with a resigned "the devil made me do it" as all was forgiven.

As may be obvious, this retelling is extremely over simplified, ignoring decades of events prior that led to the fever pitch of the New England witch paranoia. First off, the witch trials were not held in Salem alone, but in 26 communities inside New England. In most towns, only one or two people were accused of witchcraft, Salem Town and Salem village among others being exceptions to that rule. In most communities, those who were accused were those considered to be angry, or poor, or widowed, anything that would make them a loathed community member, an easy target. The witch trials may have been an easy way to get rid of unwanted people (Latner, 2008.) Of course, there were exceptions; Rebecca Nurse, an elderly grandmother and a pillar of the community, was accused and hanged for witchcraft. However, the norm was that the victims were generally disliked in their communities.

Another aspect that is often overlooked is that the events in 1692 did not take place all at once or in one place, rather, they happened in waves, starting in the Feburary of 1692, before declining that June, (probably do to the establishment of the special witch court, the Court of Oyer and Terminer) only to reemerge on June 28th 1692 (Latner, 2008.) This trend of ebbs and

flows continued until the end of the epidemic, spreading, it seems, from one community to the next. (Latner, 2008.)

As stated before, most of the victims of the 1692 witch trials were social outcasts, but their trials had as much to do with their social status as with their gender. Though most of the victims were female, a few males (20-25%) were accused as well, and in their trials, their gender was brought up explicitly. For Puritan men, the standard of manhood was measured in; emotional control, the ability to run a family, and the ability to do one's manual labor. They were also expected to take care of the emotional needs of their wives and children, guiding the family as a pillar of compassion, love, and hope. At the same time, men were expected to discipline their wives and children, yet not cruelly so. A good husband and father was patient and firm, keeping his family healthy, happy, and in line. Since a Puritan husband and father controlled the household, any misbehavior of his wife and children would reflect negatively on him, his character, and his role as the divinely appointed head of the house (Godbeer, 2017.)

Men who did not fulfil the roles were especially vulnerable to allegations of witchcraft. In the case of Hugh Parsons of Springfield, Massachusetts, his wife Mary brought up his abuses towards her, as well as his callous attitudes towards the deaths of their infant children, into his witch trial. Mary even went so far as to suggest that he may have used witchcraft to kill their babies (Godbeer, 2017.)

This situation proposes an interesting question; just as the witch trials of New England rid communities of beggars, scolds, and generally difficult people, could they also have been a method of getting rid of abusive family members, neighbors, and employers? In a world as rigid as Puritan New England, one's place in life was almost always decided a birth, or at least maturity. For someone in an abusive situation, trapped by a well-meaning but oppressive and

largely ignorant society, would accusing an abuser of witchcraft be a nonconventional, yet convenient, way to not only get oneself out of a dangerous situation, but also assert one's own autonomy? When Abigail Williams and Tituba accused others of witchcraft, were they merely malicious, or were they using, for the first time in their lives, a form of power? It certainly blurs the lines between the scheming accuser and the innocent and virtuous accused.

Despite being under the authority of a man, Puritan women were actually held in esteem by their communities, provided, of course, they fallow along with Puritan society's rules on what a woman should be. Women who fulfilled their expected rules as wife, mother, and pious lady were called by Puritans "handmaids of the lord," holding an important and somewhat honored place in their society (Godbeer, 2017.) Women were expected to follow and help their husbands, teach and nurture their children, and participate in a joyous and humble way in the larger community.

A good Puritan woman fit into an increasingly narrow and tight box, a box that had no room for mental illness, trauma, defiance, or freethinking. Mentally ill women, homeless women, women who had had pre-marital or extra marital sex, rape victims, abuse victims, and "scolding" or "quarrelsome" women were extremely at risk. As previously stated, most of the accused were women, and though Godbeer in his essay points out the reasons men were accused of witchcraft in context of their men, it cannot honestly be said that every woman who was accused of witchcraft did not, at some point, have her gender used against her in the witch courts.

Another misunderstood character (and everyone in the Salem Witch Trials is a character to the modern world, for better or for worse,) is Tituba. Tituba, in Arthur Miller's play "The Crucible" is the catalyst for the events of the play. After she preforms a ritual to contact the spirits of some of the girl's dead siblings, the children, in their guilt over their act of heresy,

feign horrifying, violent fits, brought on by "witches." Here's what we know for sure about Tituba; Tituba was Reverend Parris' slave who confessed to witchcraft and accused other people of the same crime. She then was sent to jail for a time, and was released, probably into slavery again. These are the facts of her story. However, as Bernard Rosenthal expresses in his 1998 article, *Tituba's Story*, the issue of Tituba's race has become a very important part of the Salem narrative.

While in many reenactments of the Salem Witch Trials, Tituba is portrayed as African, Rosenthal points out that in the original court documents, Tituba is described as "Indian." He notes that people of African heritage who were accused of witchcraft were explicitly described as black. In his essay, he discusses the ways in which a black Tituba is framed; she is an exotic curiosity, showing the local Puritan girls fortune telling and other magics, yet in no way trying to harm the girls. When their activities are discovered, Tituba essentially grovels at the feet of Reverend Parris, telling the man exactly what he wants to hear.

She is simultaneously framed as a tempter and an, if not innocent, at least ignorant victim of the fanatical Reverend. In this narrative, the girls she tells fortunes too are a delightful subversion; little white girls, the symbols of purity, gleefully scheming to have their neighbors hanged. This narrative about Tituba is extremely harmful in that as it sets Tituba as a helpless victim, it completely denies her her agency. While it is true that the historical records on Tituba are sparse at best, the fact is that in various narratives, other characters are given agency where she is not. In *The Crucible*, for instance, Mary Warren has a compelling character arch in which she struggles with her part as an accuser in the witch trials, and her knowledge that the claims of her and her friends are completely false. Tituba gets no such development. In almost every popular adaptation, she is framed as the catalyst, set dressing for the more "interesting

developments." The fact that Tituba, the only person of color in most retellings of the Trials, is an afterthought denotes a great issue of racism in the way that authors and historians frame reenactments of the Salem witch trials.

The Salem Witch Trials were not the only witch trials in American history, but they are considered the most well-known. While I believe that, of course, it is extremely important to put together the events as they happened, for the sake of historical honesty, and to remember the men and women who were imprisoned and lost their lives, I believe it is equally important to look at how the events have influenced the American landscape.

The most popular version of the story of the witch trials comes from Arthur Miller. His play (which I admit is one of my favorites) follows the Salem story fairly closely in some respects, but in many others completely butchers historical events for the sake of "drama." In the play, the girls accusing the witches are led by the teenaged Abigail Williams, who is seemingly motivated by her guilt over her affair with John Proctor. In reality, Williams was about ten or eleven when the events took place, and she almost certainly did not have an affair with Proctor. Thus, this version, while enjoyable, should be taken with several large handfuls of salt.

Many other adaptations have followed, including various documentaries of varying accuracy and quality. The first reenactment of the Salem Witch Trials I saw took place on a TV of *Discovery Kids* called *Truth or Scare*. Every Saturday night, I would sit alone in the basement living room, laying sideways in the recliner as my hands shook from the pure terror laid out before me on the TV. In that darkened room, I first saw the story of Salem played bout. From there, the Salem witches became a part of my childhood. My great grandmother and I would play Hansel and Gretel in the kitchen, with her as the wicked witch and me as the brave Gretel. Later,

my dolls would play out dramas between good witches and bad witches as I got home from trick or treating in my pumpkin orange witch's costume.

As I got older, the idea of witches appealed to me even more. On a trip to New Orleans in one of its many "Voodoo Shops" (which were more like a hodgepodge of Neo Pagan books, candles, and little plastic goth fairy figurines) I found a book of faerie legends, which led to me searching YouTube for Old and Middle English ballads. Upon discovering a Neo Pagan band, I was smitten. So, from the ages of 16 to 18, I was a Wiccan, or Witch (I used the two interchangeably.) Like many, I felt this religion gave me power, not only as a woman, but as a human. I had real spiritual power, the ability to control the world around me. In my heart, I knew it was just a matter of time before I was swept off into the land of Fae to meet my faerie prince and live happily ever after.

Of course, now I know that I am not strictly a woman, and my faerie prince could just as easily be a faerie princess, or, heck, even a non-binary goblin baker. Who needs a partner that adheres to the outdated institution of monarchy, anyway? As time has gone on, I have let go of my Wiccan beliefs, but I still have much respect for the community of folx I met. My first exposer to a healthy trans narrative came from a Neopagan singer I followed, Alexander James Adams.

The Salem Witch Trial, an event that is still shrouded in uncertainty, have led to a slew of movies, documentaries, and academic articles. Through the study of the events, a greater understanding of Puritan culture, gender roles, and psyche can be understood. Through the analysis of the records and reenactments of it, we can gain a better understanding of our modern society, the counter cultures within, and our own biases.

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